

159. The Hidden Signals That Make Customers Trust You with Gal Borenstein

You can have a great offer, a beautiful website, and use all the right strategies, even follow all the expert advice, and still lose the sale. Why? Because in today's world, everything is filtered through one thing: trust. Trust isn't built by showing up. It's built by what people believe about you before they ever click or book anything or buy anything. And here's the tricky part. A lot of small business owners are unintentionally breaking trust without even realizing it. So today, I'm talking with author and agency founder Gal Borenstein about how to fix that. Gal is the CEO of the Borenstein Group in Washington, DC, and is the author of *Don't Believe the Hype: When Trust Is on the Line*. It's a guide for executives or business owners, anybody that's navigating digital branding and marketing in the age of AI. So super interesting conversation. Here's my talk with Gal. Hey, Gail. for joining me today. Welcome to My Weekly Marketing. Thank you for having me. So there's a lot of noise out there. There's AI, there's content everywhere.

Everybody is claiming to be an expert. Why is trust getting to be harder and harder to build instead of easier? Trust is becoming harder to stick with because, AI has essentially automated a problem that existed in all businesses. When you think about the narrative of a business, it could be you have the best hot dogs in the world or better ingredients, better pizza, all the way to, having a cybersecurity software that to do and other technology products. We own the narrative as marketers, as people that are in charge of kinda creating a promise. The promise was based on taking a narrative and taking it to the market, and that's where it stopped. But now, with the advent of AI, fake reviews, fake news, fake, videos, the reality has changed. And what changed in the reality is simply that, you don't control the narrative anymore. There's social media, there's Glassdoor that your employees can complain or disgruntled employees that can lower your score of trust. So what really has changed is that we no longer control the narrative, and we really have to focus on being creative about building something that is resilient. 'Cause if your brand is not resilient, at the end of the day it won't work out because the outside crowd will make sure that it's destroyed and your competitors will take advantage of it. Hmm. what are businesses doing now that they're getting wrong about building a trusted brand? Is it just us-- Is it using AI or what is it that would flag something as not being trustworthy? Or does this apply across the board to any brand? I really think that it applies more and more, and every day as agentic AI is being integrated. We've created, a brilliant mind, if you will, that can spit answers and accelerate process of content creation, but so did other companies. So at the end of the day, trust is built on differentiation, on belief in system of values. And just like in the kind of old days, if you will, two years ago, three years ago, where everybody would put, "We're sustainable company and we-" Care about the environment, and then after a year or two, people realize that it's just like another word that they put into the company values, and in reality, they didn't really do anything. Mm-hmm. Now we have a construct where we take the values that we have or the promises that we make about our products and services, and we really don't go through the process of thinking, number one, "What is the original thought? What is the thing that we're contributing to make our customer feel special, to make the prospects that we approach feel engaged, and then create something that can mass replicate itself into something that helps us?" The opposite is just what happens. mm-hmm. the FOMO, where every small business,

every sole entrepreneur, all the way to, big corporations, realize that if they don't have AI, their valuation is gonna be lower, or they're not gonna be able to be, competitive with another company that might be bigger. So everybody start hiring AI agent companies that would code it into your system, whether it's HubSpot for content and, CRM, or any other kind of, part of the business. But in that process, the soul of the brand has been lost. And in fact, what is happening is that people are relying on AI to create a personality, which is like basically going on a dating app and deciding who you are based on swipe left and swipe right, without having the actual date and the relationship that will become something that is great or something that you continue to swipe left or right. And that's really the kind the marketplace works. So in reality, AI is destroying trust, and at the same time, it could be leveraged into creating trust. The difference between businesses that succeed and businesses that don't succeed comes down to one thing: Trust has to be done internally before it can become something that your prospects and customers believe in. For example, if you don't have the culture in your company where management believes in the same things that your staff believes in, or the business developers that go out to sell, that's a problem because they will deliver a message that is not coherent and consistent with what it is that you actually do. And they'll just make up stuff, and then they'll become, an email chain that mass replicates itself into sending to a thousand people versus a controlled environment where you used to- Maybe send that hundred email and decided, okay, does it work? Does it not? So there's a lot of confusion, and that confusion is caused by mainly the fear of missing out, combined with not understanding what the role of building trust system into your business and benchmarking what works and what doesn't, and how that would apply to using AI into the future. So was there a time where-- 'cause you run an agency, right? When did you realize that this was such an important, I don't wanna say pivot in our culture, but it kind of is in a way with the advent of AI. It's just things have really shifted dramatically. So what made you want to, really focus on this and, and write a book about it? Well, being in the business, running The Born Singer, founding The Born Singer, been running it and working with a lot of CEOs, it's always been something that we paid attention to because at the end of the day, if you have something that is non-believable by the consumers or the customers or the clients, no matter what industry you're in, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter how great an idea you have, it won't replicate and it won't produce repeatable and predictable outcomes, which is kind of the way we view, the creative process and creating a brand for a company that won't, result in rebranding every year after that because you didn't get it right the first time. With that said, branding and trust haven't been so close together until, deepfake videos became, the soup du jour, if you will, where you can actually look at a video and really pass it as your own brand. A spokesperson that doesn't exist in reality is carrying your brand and that eventually becomes a breakdown of trust. Then working with CEOs, I ask them, you know, "What is the most important thing for you today?" They say, "We're losing our reputation." Hmm. are you losing your reputation? And what does that look like?" And the answer was, "We're not sure if, what we see in reviews online about our product is something that a competitor put up or something that disgruntled employees put up about our HR." And what it creates is chaos. And in that chaos, there's gonna be only two companies or two s- kinds of companies. Companies that listen to what their digital footprint looks like and take advantage of it, and people that basically say, "We were never communicators. It's all about our coffee or our chocolate or our, cybersecurity software. It doesn't really matter." But- We're basically staying the way things used to be in the

old school, where, you know, you had your message, you got it out, you're advertising, people bought it or not. And that's not a way you can scale anymore because the world of opportunities has expanded. With the web now, it doesn't matter if you're in Switzerland or in Japan or in, Bethesda, Maryland, the same type of product that you have can be sold anywhere. Take a look at Etsy, for example, is a unique buying experience that took what eBay did and then parlayed itself into something that is unique. And then their customer service is exceptional, which is not the case when you call eBay and you get like an email Hmm. that basically you never get to talk to anybody. Yeah. Yeah. And I can see where this is happening. It's changing so rapidly too. Now you have a framework that you talk about in your book that, you s- can apply, that, businesses can apply, correct? Yes. So why don't you give me a short summary of the framework overall, and then I have a f- few questions about each stage of those. Okay. The summary version of it, when I wrote the book, and really to answer your previous question, it was really started as kind of like a letter to leadership telling them, "Take a look at what you're doing, and take a look at what you're not doing to kind of keep your brand resilient in the age of digital marketing and AI." And what it became then is kind of a story that I had to create with real situations, with fictitious names in fictitious companies that I've worked with in reality, and then kind of give them kind of a personality, if you will, so people can relate to being in a board meeting or being in a management meeting in a company, doesn't really matter. And the trust, framework that I created is called The Guardian, and it's based on three principles, which is you gotta basically have values in ter- in terms of your own company that is shared in a company culture and is consistent before you do anything, before you produce any product or service or start selling. And very often that's not the case. People in leadership especially, and in management tend to get to hear what they want to hear versus what they need to hear. The second is, have you ever done a voice of the customer survey and actually asked them the tough questions and got the bad things that they told you, and considered how are you gonna benchmark them and fix them? So next time, your product does better. It used to be called a customer service survey, but it really isn't. The voice of the customer is something that you have to do in order to realize how you can improve the relationship that you have across the board. And if you're making promises about a product and then you don't get the customer support and somebody tells you that and you basically brush it aside because, hey, we don't have enough people to take care of all these people that are calling, that's the wrong answer. The second part is really to be able to create authenticity and transparency in the brand. So there's, if you follow kind of any kind of TV ads right now, the biggest thing is health-related, wellness-related products that are out there. And they all look like they're real. They're all basically going to make you look 20 years younger and taller and, you know, slimmer and whatever it is that they're promising. And what they don't have very often is real customer testimonials. So the second part is your test of building a trusted brand has to do with can you get customer testimonials that are real from the customers by both interacting with them directly and by doing surveys, but getting authenticity in the brand by having people that look like you, essentially, to communicate effectively. And the third is listen to your staff. Very often, people in very small to mid-sized companies don't listen to their staff. Unless there's an accident, they basically move on in the day or fire the employee instead of looking at the problem. And when you kind of take those elements and you break them down, you either have something that can carry itself to the marketplace with a consistency or you don't. And the framework allows you to basically say, hey,

nobody's perfect. And we're not striving to be perfect. But what we're trying to do is create a system where everything is authentic. If there's a problem, we communicate it to customers when it happens, not three weeks later when there's a bad review about it. And making sure that the team that is managing the company really kind of carries the leadership and corporate values that they're promising on that big poster that you kind of walk down the hall next to the CEO's office or the business owner. Okay. Last time we talked, we talked about, awareness, alignment, authenticity, and accountability, right? Yes. Awareness is definitely part of that, which basically means understanding how the hype and misinformation distort how your customer sees you. Yes. So what kind of hype you see, is really damaging for smaller businesses? The best way to kill a small business is to have five bad reviews on Google, Hmm. small business thinks that it can't be, resolved because these customers were very angry. And in reality, it could be a competitor that is bashing your business anonymously and using a Gmail account. And because they have an authentic Gmail account, it makes them, eligible for putting their feedback, or on Glassdoor, horrible culture, don't hire, don't even try to apply to this company because they're horrible people, and they destroy everything that they promise. So awareness being, having situational awareness of what are the issues that you have, and then benchmark them. And you don't have to pick all of them. You can pick three critical issues with situational awareness. Do we know what the problems that we have in the digital footprint of a company? Our social media, our review sites. Do we know what fake reviews are fake reviews? Because we can track them, and we know it, that there's no customer that ever bought something. Mm-hmm. can be proactive about it and create content that would take that information downwards and put our information ahead of it by education. So that's what situational awareness is about. And transparency is about really admitting when you have a problem. How many companies have recalls sometimes? On a big scale, you hear it through the, the government that issues a recall for a part for a car. But think about your business if, let's say you're a restaurant, and you had a really bad night and somebody got sick, which had nothing to do with your standards. How do you treat it? Do you just let it go or do you come out and say, "Somebody got sick tonight. We want to acknowledge it, and here's what we're doing to make sure that doesn't happen again"? That's the difference between a company that is transparent and a company or a small business that is hiding things. And at the end of the day, whatever you're hiding, you can no longer hide because you're no longer in charge or able to control what people are saying about you on the outside. Oh, that is so true. Yeah. I think one thing I tell clients or students is that has a brand, whether you realize it or not. And, you know, if you don't establish what your brand is, other people are gonna make that determination for you. Absolutely. And another way of saying that really is somebody will define it for you. Yeah. In connection to that, something that I always, quote to people that not sure what branding means other than they think it's a logo, or they think it's a color of your office or whatever it is that it's not really what it is. I al- always quote Jeff Bezos of Amazon that was asked a question, "What is brand?" And his answer was, "It's what people say about you when you're not in the room." It's what people say about you when you're not in the room. So think about that room being your customer world, your prospect world, your reputation. They're all connected to something that people are saying about you that you don't control, but you do control. You have what we call today a digital footprint. So if I'm looking to procure a service, and now with the AI integrated into search engines now they'll pull up kind of a view about a company. And if you're not aware

of how to do SEO and how to correctly kind of, uh, create content that the search engines that are using generative AI, you can have a really bad description about your company or something that completely is misleading and is not in your favor, or you can flip it and actually create something great. is a perfect segue into your second part of your framework, which is alignment, making sure that the brand promise matches the experience, right? Yes. Where-- an example of b- of a business that sounds good in their marketing but loses trust this-- when someone interacts with them? Do you have an example of something like that? Or what are the first couple places people should check for misalignment? Brand misalignment is very common, and this is again, going back to the premise of the book, which is in the framework, is that you gotta know what your demons are on the inside of the company and recognize them and know that you're not gonna solve all of them. But the other part is making sure that the people that, for example, if you're a service business and you have people that install a product, let's say an HVAC system, for example, that your technicians really believe that the product works And don't gossip about the company when they're in the customer site, which I experienced personally a few years ago when a new air conditioning system was installed in my house. And the people were nice. They were very polite. And then as soon as they kind of walked three feet away from the area where it was installed, they start trashing their own company and talking about their bosses. And what do you think the level of trust that I had in this company? I was already in too deep because I paid a deposit and it was cold outside and we had to make sure that we had the system working. But I didn't have a really good impression of the company. And I could have written a really kind of genuine review. And then the company would have said, that never happened. So the alignment is the technician or your staff or your barista, whatever business you have is the front line of your brand ambassadorship. But if they're not really aligned and taken care of by management and middle management and then leadership in the company, what you have is a discord. And the discord creates people being forced to invent things that don't exist to just make the sale or just make stuff happen. And making stuff happen without making sure that you're aligned is a recipe for disaster. And to give you a company example that has been in the news for a very long time, Boeing. Not a small company, but a case study for what happens when a small part that was reported by quality assurance technicians didn't get to the next level of management in a timely fashion created Boeing to crash over plane and taking them five years to recover from the premise that they're no longer associated with safety as their brand. So now maybe we should look at Airbus if you're on a very high level thinking about it. And that alignment has to be there. And that's the communication process that is embedded into that resilience that you have to create through that alignment. Hmm. Great example. All right, what about authenticity? So it's one of those words that gets tossed around a lot. Where do you think that people can come across as being inauthentic? Or how do you stay consistent across platforms without feeling like you're not being authentic? You know, I think that it ties in a little bit with alignment because you want to communicate a message, but you want to make sure that it is authentic. I think those two maybe kind of go hand in hand. Absolutely. And, what has changed? So in the old world, which again is two, three years ago, not to date how marketing has always been around the idea of, is it snake oil or is it, really a cure for your skin, right? That's always been around. But what changed is now people demand authenticity, and the way to do it correctly is not to just say, "Trust me," and make statements, bombastic statements how your product is better than everybody else's, and focus more on statement that says it works, for

example. And then solicit customer testimonials of people that are the same as what you would describe as the ideal customer profile, and embed them into your story. And the storytelling of a brand, that has that typically produces a lot higher level of trust than those who basically have a spokesperson or a small business owner that just say, "Trust me, my pizza is the best," or "Trust me, our software works better than everybody else." Why should I trust you? Mm-hmm. Why? Where are the... Where's the evidence? And when you think about it on the abstract level, but also practically, if you bought an iPad or you bought a PC in the past ten or fifteen years, all the way to now having no PC and no iPad because you just, everything is software as service, how do you know that it actually works when they make the promise that it's faster, cheaper, has better components? You really don't. The only way you'd know is by you taking control of the narrative and creating proof points that are communicated via customers and consumers and prospects that are able to say, "I tested it and it really works." Or they promise that they're gonna have the best customer service and responsive customer service, and they actually deliver it. That's what authenticity looks like in the new world of branding simply because you can't hide your, faults anymore. These faults are gonna come out, and they're gonna show up on Google. And instead of them showing me at page two, which ninety-nine percent of the people never go to on Google- it's gonna show number three or number five because the freshest information that Google was able to index. So you can't do that anymore, and if you do, you're, you'll fail, and your business will be victim to being a broken promise. really well with what you said too about the, pizza parlor coming out and saying, someone got sick when they ate here," or You know, that maybe has a recall on You know, that's real authenticity when they can come forward and say that. Really hard to do. I mean, I wanna have to do it, but it is important to do, especially when trust is so high where-- for a company that, is involved in., airlines, or putting food in our body, anything like that authenticity is so much.. I mean, it's everything, right? Yes. Yeah. And, to take a, you know, more kind of a mass appeal type of example is think about all, the vitamin industry and how every two years there's a new revolution of solving kind of a health-related issue, and there's no proof. It's not approved by the FDA. There's nothing to really support it unless you really, wanna believe in something that is not in your lane of, thinking, and that's okay. If you choose to do it, it's a free country, and if it doesn't kill you, right? Mm-hmm. makes you stronger, that's great. But when you see the same patterns of behavior which are closer to back 100 years ago to the snake oil selling, that hurts the brands of companies and solutions that actually work, and that becomes your competition. So having those abilities to kind of connect the dots between authenticity, like having customer testimonials that look real, not three people from Florida that always the same people that show up on a bike, that show up on a, some kind of device that helps them, you know, make their stature better or lose weight, that seems to be kind of a joke. Think, people think that that's a joke or just in that industry. It's the same thing that's happening in technology, in AI. Companies are sold that AI will solve all their problems. It won't. You have to stay true to what your company does and make sure that that parlays itself into how you produce it, and make sure there's good customer support behind it that is believable. So if a company says, "We'll call you back tomorrow," and they don't- That hurts your brand more than anything else. Yeah. Yeah. Which leads into number four, which is accountability. How do you measure trust in a business where you can... Or maybe accountability isn't measurable. Maybe it's something that is done by feel. Accountability is something that changed, by the sheer fact that all information is online now, and you can't hide,

the things that don't go right. And anybody who has a heart and, has legitimate reason to buy something and believe in the product or service that they're buying, needs to know that on the other end, which is your business, your small business or your middle-sized business in any type of industry, will be accountable if something doesn't work. And I can give you a personal example without naming the name of the company as a consumer that I just went through, which was a large furniture maker that makes recliners. The recliner that I bought nine months ago bought, broke, and I wasn't able to use the features on it anymore, and the wood just split at the bottom, and I didn't do anything different than I do every day. So I called the company, which I had a warranty with, and, then they said, "This is the number for the warranty organization that will help, process your, problem." So they asked me to upload the pictures of the recliner. They asked me to provide evidence that I bought it, the purchase order, e-every other kind of serial number that is on, at the bottom of the chair, which kind of, weighs like a hundred pounds, so it causes more inconvenience, and they have that information already. But let's say that they did it all to get the right information so they can order the right parts, but that's not what happened. Instead, they basically say, "Go to a portal and upload that information." And I've done that five times in a period of a month and never got an actual email confirming that the information that I uploaded to customer service and a warranty company that supports a very well-known brand in the recliner industry, it didn't go anywhere. So the only way I'd solve, I could solve that problem was to escalate it to outside the organization and actually call the CEO office of that brand. And say, is that what you want people to think about your brand? You don't really return phone calls or customers that spend thousands of dollars on a, on your products. So who owns that responsibility and accountability? I, as a customer, obviously had the responsibility to provide them all the information, even if it was annoying. But at the same time, if internally within the organization, they say, "Oh, you know, we'll get another customer," or, "This customer, we can upsell them another product," instead of actually taking care of the problem, or worse, they outsource the customer service organization to a third party that really doesn't care about your brand, Yeah. then there's nobody accountable in that process. That becomes your brand. And when that becomes your brand, it doesn't take, twenty, recliners for that to happen, only five. And guess what? The worst part for that particular manufacturer was I just started googling and saying, "Are there any, Better Business Bureau complaints? Are there any complaints by other customers? Am I crazy? Am I the only one who had a problem with honoring the warranty that they sold you and actually I paid for?" And the answer was there are thousands. And there's a group on Facebook, actually, with sixteen thousand members that say, "We got cheated by that manufacturer." And they're talking about how to Wow. It. And somebody actually put a comment today that said, "I contacted them six months ago, and I haven't yet gotten a person on the phone because it's always, 'We're too busy right now to take your call. Please leave us a message,' and nobody calls back," because nobody cares. Now, is that true that nobody cares? Probably not. But if that's your accountability to your customers and your prospects, chances are that your brand is gonna be tarnished, and then that's becoming its own narrative in the marketplace. Hmm. Powerful example. I always feel like can learn a lot by simply taking the role of a customer and going through the process and seeing where things slip up. It happens in every business. There's always in a checkout or a link that doesn't work, or Yep. and just really paying attention to that. and you can find out so much more by doing that. And it's amazing to me that these large corporations seem to not care, and I-i-it wouldn't take much for that

company to find that group on Facebook. I would assume the CEO would want to rectify it, but that's interesting. And I don't think that there's a CEO out there that was born evil and wanted to make an evil corporation where they're selling something that they can't support. But in the new digital footprint and digital marketing world that we live in and digital brands, we-we're no longer able to hide something and not being accountable for it. And accountable doesn't mean you have to give me the money back. Maybe you can fix it. Maybe there's other things that you can do to make me feel better as a customer in the example that I gave you. But in a very kind of pedestrian way, I always ask, our client, CEOs or, small business owners, "Have you ever called your company? Mm-hmm. line?" Mm-hmm. And you'd be surprised how many of them say, "Why would I call my company? I go there and I see the people that I need to see." And I said, "No, just so you can see what's the ordering experience from your company. What is the presentation that is being made about your product?" And you say, "Well, that's why I have the customer relations department and the quality assurance department." And I said, "But you're a human being too, right? You're not different than anybody else if you're buying a product or a service that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. So why won't you call your own company?" And the joke is, that comes after is I don't remember my company's number. But in reality, it's, tells a lot about how much time did the business, take to actually go through the customer experience. And when you don't go through it yourself and order something yourself, which is the best advice I can give any small business owner. You know, go incognito or send your niece or your sister or your s- brother or your son, to make a purchase and go back and report what their customer experience was, and if something went wrong, did they make it accountable? Did they apologize? Did they give a better service? Because now it's going online. It's no longer a secret between the service provider and the customer. It's going all the way to a bad, TikTok review that now mass multiplies times, "Oh, I experienced the same thing in Atlanta and in, uh, you know, Antarctica." It doesn't matter where. People unite around complaint. People love to complain, which is the nature of human beings, and that's never gonna change. The question is, going back to what you said very, insightfully so, is you need to own your brand Mm- yeah. . Right, so let's summarize this. So we have awareness, so really w-we want to understand how our product or service is coming across in the marketplace. We want to make sure that it's aligned, to your brand promise and that the brand matches the experience that you promise them. You want to be authentic with e-everything. Be yourself. Make sure that, when I say be yourself, be authentic to who your brand is and to your brand promise. So that your audience can trust you on a larger basis than they're having issues that can't get resolved, like your experience. Of course. And then the wrap up for this really is you don't have to be great at everything that you're dealing with, but you can benchmark where you are. And if you were at a three on solving customer problems, for example, in order to build trust, you have to put that three out of ten and then come back to it and say, "What have we done? And what are the corrective actions that we're gonna take to make sure that it doesn't happen a hundred times more to other customers?" Hmm. if people don't trust the price that they're getting because it says retail price is this, and then they go to a store and it's half the price anywhere, which means it's not something sustainable and believable, authenticity, right? Mm-hmm. Maybe we're at a five right now. Benchmark it, and again, come back to it with an action plan to remediate the problem, which could be an accounting problem, but now it's a branding problem. And then go back and measure it again in six months. That's something that management can do even in the

smallest business and in larger companies where you have people that actually are getting paid to make sure that that's the case. But they don't, because they never sat down in a room and talked about trust in the context of the brand in the new digital age and the age of AI that replicates everything and duplicates things, and problems don't get solved. They actually get more critical mass and spread like fire. It's about continuous improvement. I also love- To speculate on where this is all headed, but I won't have you do that because I don't think anybody really knows how AI is gonna play out long term. But I love your framework. I think this, these are four really good things to pay attention to we go about bro- growing our business, for sure. Gal, where can people find more about you and your books, all that good stuff? Well, the easiest way to find my books is on amazon.com. We have, written out, two books that I wrote. The first is, Don't Believe the Hype: When Trust is on the Line in the Digital Age, and, Fake Reviews. And the second one is, Beating Alive with AI, which is a leadership, and small business owner book with actual tips that you can use to actually, fix your issues and beat the big guys at their own game by using the slingshots, if you will. And if you wanna connect, use LinkedIn. I'm on LinkedIn and we have over eight thousand followers and the reason for that is people connect with some of the content that I put there be- and because it's Based on experience and it's based on a reality and not just formulas that don't really work in the real world. And finally, if you wanna see if the Bornstein Group is the right company to work with, visit our website at bornsteingroup.com and be delighted to respond. And test us if we respond to you in less than one hour, I 'cause that's our rule. That's perfect. I will put all of those links, of course, in the show notes for today. thanks so much for being here. I love, this topic. I think it's something that we all need to pay attention to, and we are all so busy it's easy for things to fall between the cracks. So it's so important that we do pay attention to all of this. There's nothing more important than that for a business to succeed. Yeah, I agree. Thank you.